

Gypsy meets villager... and they



The anticipated clash between gypsy leader Cliff Codona and Cottenham parish council chair Paula Johnson ended in a polite and positive 160 party.

Photograph by David Rose



The battle between residents and travellers has been likened to civil war, but when **Euan Ferguson** got the two sides together the differences melted away. So why is everyone so angry about the issue?

PREJUDICE makes life so much simpler, don't you find? Reactionary prejudice, liberal prejudice. We know just where we're coming from, and for a while the world seems a little more manageable. Then you come across the gypsies.

Here, for instance, are some of my own fast reactions this past week. On reading a quote from Wiltshire North Tory MP James Gray on the 'explosion' of gypsies and travelling people in England: 'Now is the time for us to be tough. There are tens of thousands of people in caravans in Italy and Romania who are watching how we deal with the situation. If we are soft on it, they will be coming.' I laugh, as you

would with any pronouncement which sounds like the blurb for a Fifties B film.

When I put down the phone on a prominent member of a rich village community who has just told me, solemnly, 'I won't sit down with Poley', I wonder both what it is about the absence of the indefinite article which renders the epithet so much more dislikeable, and why it is these days in rural England that the phrase 'prominent in the community' heralds less a frisson of respect than a shiver of foreboding.

And then, later that night, in the dark and rain, as I try to find the nice gypsy people to hear their woes, I am chased back through barbed wire and mud by a pack of bad yellow dogs being egged on by filthy, unhelpful children and find myself thinking 'ferless gypsy scam'.

Next morning, walking the banks of the Thames by Pangbourne in Berkshire, where Kenneth Grahame set *Wind in the Willows*, it was possible to be dismissive of the irritating prettiness of the homes and yet think, well, if that was my irritatingly pretty home then, with the best liberal credentials in the world, I still wouldn't be happy to open its curtains every morning and see, instead of an irritatingly pretty waterbank, a thumping ugly rusted skip.

You can see the problem. I was changing irrational prejudices faster than a Home Secretary Better, perhaps, to try to get the two sides together, for once, away from lazy media sniping between the people who hate gypsies and the people who hate the people who hate gypsies, and find out what's going wrong.

This getting-together was easier thought than done. In the past year or so, tensions between rural residents and travellers (Romany gypsies, Irish-Scots travellers and a handful of New Agers) have come close to meltdown at a dozen sites in England.

No gypsies' signs are going up in pubs in Essex. Last month an 18-year-old girl was thrown off a bus in Sandy, Bedfordshire, just for being a gypsy. Trevor Phillips of the Commission for Racial Equality has compared their plight to that of 'black folk in the Deep South of the US 40 years ago'.

In 1994 the Tory government removed the duty on

local councils to provide sites for travellers. At around the same time, parking their trailers on verges and other public places became not a civil but a criminal offence.

There are an estimated 200,000 members of the 'travelling community' in Britain, over 80 per cent of them with legal homes and businesses. The frontages of our seaside towns would be empty without them, and about 6,000 living legally on the remaining 324 official (and now chock full) council sites.

But for the last decade there has been an increasing number, recently estimated by a Commons select committee as 3,000 and growing, without anywhere to legally stop, and consequently they have now been openly, unapologetically, buying green field space with their own money, exploiting planning loopholes (dodging last minute applications over bank holiday weekends and the like), and having their trailer legs sunk in concrete before the relevant council has had time to face its bureaucratic booby: all of which has, of course, royally infuriated the rich residents of pretty villages.

Add a substantial increase of tabloid scaremongering, in which gypsies are afforded similar treatment to asylum seekers, and a pledge by Michael Howard to fiddle with the Human Rights Act to stop gypsies 'abusing' it, and you can see much is in place for a new English civil war.

YET, WHEN *The Observer* does manage to get the two sides together, at Cottenham in Cambridgeshire, the common ground is astonishing enough to have the most rampant tabloid mud-slingers and woolliest liberals grinding teeth at the lack of sparks.

Cliff Codona of the National Travellers' Action Group can remember every sub-section of every piece of planning legislation enacted in his lifetime relating to gypsies. He has to remember: he is happy to confess he can't read or write. Paula Johnson is the chair of Cottenham Parish Council, which has been at the centre of one of the most bitter disputes of the past year, since 60 travellers arrived unexpectedly on a local site. The Cottenham site has been used by gypsies for the past 40 years, in general with quiet tolerance from the

couldn't agree more

'settled' community, but the size and suddenness of the influx has caused a huge rise in tensions, with some locals threatening to withhold council tax unless the 'nuisance' is removed.

But as Paula welcomes Cliff into the large and comfortable home of David North, one of the better kind of 'prominent residents', there is far more mutual ground than any reading of the press would suggest.

'We've formulated our response to this select committee report,' says Paula, referring to that recent cross-party paper which urged the government to rescind the 1994 legislation and oblige councils again to provide suitable land for sites.

Cliff, sitting a touch awkwardly on a too-soft sofa, remains quiet, alert, wary; and then his face breaks into a smile as she continues: 'We completely agree. We're all adults, your community and ours, and we have to live together, so it's surely a question of getting the government to see what must be done.'

She was 'deeply disappointed', she added, with the government's response to the report – the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister said the proposal was unlikely to be taken up. There is some discussion here over why the Government should be so blindly intransigent: the consensus is that it's wary of a 'soft on gypsies' headline in the *Daily Mail*.

Cliff is delighted at their conclusion, and tells them so. 'We know we've annoyed people with the planning stuff, turning the letter of the law to our advantage. For once. But you people seem to realise, now, that we had no alternative. And don't think we enjoy it. Appeals, procedures, endless questions – it's harrowing, and endless, and tiring, and often it's demeaning. We would give anything to not have to go through it, just to be allowed to live and work.'

What did he think, asked Paula, of the parish council's recommendation, that there should be a legally binding size limit on any permitted site? Cliff thought that was dandy. Ideally there should



The travellers' site at Cottenham, and (below) a wrecked gypsy caravan near Sherbourne in the Cotswolds.

FLASHPOINT AREAS



Dale Farm, Crays Hill, Essex
Around 500 Irish and some English travellers occupy this site, on green belt land. In May last year, the group was given the right to stay for two years, causing anger among villagers. Parents have removed their children from the local primary school because of the influx of traveller children.

Smiffy Fen, Cottenham, Cambridgeshire
Home to dozens of families for many years. But when Irish travellers came in large numbers last year, long-term residents had to move to adjoining land without permission. This angered locals, who blamed them for noise, litter and even an unsolved murder.

Sherborne, Gloucestershire
Romany gypsies moved on to this small site, on National Trust land, after being evicted from another site five miles away. After complaints from locals, the 13 adults and 12 children were ordered to leave last month. But they refused and are appealing against the decision to move them on.



n't be more than six or eight trailers on one site. You probably have one of the biggest sites in the country here, and I'm sorry, it's not right. We don't want it either. Who'd want to spend all their time with 70 relatives, bickering? It's hard enough for most people at Christmas, with seven.'

David North asks whether the Cottenham travellers are Romany. 'No, they're Irish, but this is a false distinction. Some from the settled com-

munity think 'Romany' is somehow more acceptable. Now I'm a gypsy, can trace my lineage back to Italy in the 15th century. But the Irish and the Scots have a proud and hardworking tradition as travellers too. We are fed up being at the bottom of the barrel, fed up with the insults, when our heritage is older than most of the aristocracy in this country, and we don't want to take it much more, so you'll forgive us if we use the

laws of the land to stick up, for once, for ourselves.'

There are quiet nods, of varying enthusiasm, around the table, and talk moves to security. Cliff says he understands the distrust some feel towards gypsies. 'We're used to it. There will be bad apples, as in any community. But we do police ourselves. We have no wish to scare people, just because we've chosen a different way of life. People are letting themselves be fright-

ened by the press,' David North nods, talking of how the two communities integrated with general success until this recent influx.

'And what if there were official sites again, room for everyone?' asks Paula tentatively. 'What would your attitude be if we then objected to another illegal encampment?'

'We would agree 100 per cent. If there was room for us to live legally, I would be the first to insist every illegal encampment was shut down, instantly.'

IT ENDS IN handshakes. There are still a host of unresolved issues – aesthetics, school places, and the fact that, even if councils provided sites, the choice of venues is always going to be fraught. But after an hour observing this meeting I am left like the apocryphal singer who, after scanning the written lyrics for 'You say tomato/I say tomato', shook her head and wondered, 'It's hard to see what the problem is, exactly.'

As I drive Cliff back to his caravan, he enthuses on the travellers' way of life. How the old are cared for, to the end, never put in homes. How each community has the 'hard man', to keep wasters in line. How the cold and hard work on roads and in fields has given them ethics of their own. How those who drink too much or are prone to depression are taken aside and cared for at an early stage. How the A1 defines their lives, its north-south axis down the centuries providing a topographic spine.

Perhaps some is over-romantic, and of little reassurance to anyone who has quickened their pace past a camp at dark, or wrinkled their nose at burning rubbish, or is scared of big dogs. But is it too romantic, on this week's evidence – parish council and travellers united in a conclusion (backed, incidentally, by the Association of Chief Police Officers) – to imagine that the Government, faced with a choice between sensible legislation and one reactionary headline, might for once have the guts to take the road less travelled?